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# SELECTED DALIT AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN BIOGRAPHIES: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

SYNOPSIS

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## Introduction:

Ages of suffering and suppression led the oppressors to express their exploitation which led to the emergence of Dalit and Blacks or African-American literature. Dalit literature is literature written by Dalits for the Dalits about their lives. It emerged in the 1960s, with Marathi language, and soon flourished in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangla, Tamil languages and English too and is a portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. 'Dalit literature denounced as petty and false then prevailing portrayal of life by the mainstream Marathi literature which lacked mention of the abject poverty-stricken lifestyle of the Dalits and the utter oppression the Dalits faced, at that time, from the higher castes.' (1) Black literature, also called African-American literature, is literature created by Black for Black people and begins with the works of such late 18th-century writers as Phillis Wheatley. African-American literature, known as slave narratives in the 19th century, was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives. Among the themes and issues explored in this literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and social equality. Dalit literature is often compared with African-American literature especially in its depiction of issues of racial segregation and injustice, as seen in slave narratives.

> "Comparisons between oppressed groups are not only natural but also sometimes necessary; natural because their struggle to reclaim the human space denied them for centuries is almost similar; necessary because the group that has taken a lead in reclaiming that space influences the other group in devising their strategies, far removed from the area of their operation." (Kapoor 13)

The term comparative literature includes comparative study of regional literatures, national literatures, and international literatures. Etymologically, the term comparative literature denotes any literary work or works when compared with any other literary work or works. Hence, comparative literature is the study of inter-relationship between or among any two or more than two significant literary works or literatures. It is essential that while making comparative study we must take the sources, themes, myths, forms, artistic strategies, social and religious movements and trends into consideration.

It is essential to know why biography has been chosen for this present research. What Biography does mean as a literary genre is to portray the experiences of all the events described in detail about life of an individual that entails basic facts, such as childhood, education, career, relationships, family, and death, mostly in a chronological order. The genre of biography has been developed out of other forms of historical non-fiction, choosing to focus on one specific person's experience rather than all important players. Whatever comes to us from a biography by its intense reading have been the footprints left on human mind as a motivation to live life with principles and a particular life style.

The main theme of Dalit biography is its oppression, exploitation and atrocities by the upper caste Hindus. Similarly the Black or African-American biography depicts their life of slavery and the need of freedom and literacy for them in the White society. If African-Americans suffered from slavery and racism, the Dalits endured the problem of untouchability and the inhuman caste system. Both the African-Americans and the Dalits were degraded and thrown to the lower strata of society by denying their rights which are quite necessary to them. The source of leaders found in the same communities – Dalits and Blacks – who try to uplift the status of Dalit and African-American people in terms of education, culture, social, political, economic by placing a particular ideology before them. This reflects in their biographies which encourage the exploited Dalits and Blacks to fight for 'self' and 'space'.

For the proposed research, the researcher has selected Dalit biographies including *Bhimayana*, *Ayyankali: A Dalit Leader of Organic Protest*, *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*, and Black biographies including *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary, Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art*, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Father of African Nationalism* to study and analyze the literatures comparatively for finding similarities and dissimilarities in select works comprehensively.

## LIFE OF AUTHORS AND WORKS:

### S. Anand:

S. Anand alias Stephen Anand, who is an author, publisher and journalist, founded Navayana publishing house with D. Ravikumar in 2003, focusing on the issue of caste from an anticaste perspective. He co-authored, with Srividya Natarajan, and with illustrators

Durgabai Vyam and Suresh Vyam, the hugely popular biography *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (Navayana Publication, 2011) on the life of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

*Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, biography of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar written by S. Anand and Srividya Natarajan with Pradhan Gond Artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, focuses on the history and politics of the Gond and other tribal civics called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Dalits) in India. This biography is, one may say, a conflict of Dalits, as Mahatma Phule was first to refer to untouchables whereas Ambedkar typically called the class as 'Depressed classes' and Gandhi named it 'Harijan', Hari is a name of a central Hindu God, to anti-caste.

## Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy:

She, who is a poet, fiction writer, translator and activist, was born in Chennai and she is known as feminist and a member of anti-caste Caste Annihilation movement. Meena has published two collections of poetry, *Touch* (2006) and *Militancy* (2010). Her two novels are famous in Indian literary world namely, *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and *When I Hit You: Or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017). She co-authored with M. Nisar, the biography *AYYANKALI: A Dalit leader of Organic Protest* (Other Books, Calicut, 2008).

*AYYANKALI: A Dalit leader of Organic Protest* (2008) lies on the life and activities of Ayyaṅkāḷi, 1863-1941, social reformer and Dalit leader from Kerala, India. *Pulayars*, one of the many Dalit communities in Kerala, were ordered to keep at a distance of ninety-six steps away from a Brahmin, not allowed to cover themselves above the waist or below the knees, denied admission to public roads and subjected to endless oppression. Besides, they were bought and sold as slaves even up to the middle of the nineteenth century. Ayyankali challenged these brutal caste codes. This book chronicles his organic protest in Travancore and provides a critical analysis of the social reform movements in Kerala under the colonial rule.

## Badri Narayan:

Badri Narayan (1929-2013), who was an artist, illustrator, author and story-teller, worked primarily in ink or pastel and water-colour and also illustrated children's books and wrote short stories and verse. He has received numerous awards, including the Padma Shri in 1987 and the Maharashtra Gourav Puraskar in 1990.

*Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits* was written by Badri Narayan which is the biography of a Dalit icon, Kanshiram (1934–2006), who is regarded as being next only to Ambedkar today. This book illuminates his journey, from the early years in rural Punjab and with Ambedkarites in Pune, to his launching BAMCEF, an umbrella organization uniting backward castes, scheduled tribes, Dalits and minorities and eventually the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984. Badri Narayan shows how Kanshiram mobilized Dalits with his homespun idiom, cycle rallies and, uniquely, the use of local folk heroes and myths, rousing their self-respect, and how he struck opportunistic alliances with higher-caste parties to seize power for Dalits.

## Juan Williams:

Juan Antonio Williams (1954- ), Panamanian-born American journalist and political analyst, writes for several newspapers and was a senior news analyst for National Public Radio (NPR) from 1999 until October 2010. He has worked as an editorial writer, op-ed columnist, White House correspondent and national correspondent. He is the author of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965* (1987), companion to the documentary about the Civil Rights Movement; *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* (2000) and *Enough* (2006), deals with Williams' critique of black leaders in America. Williams has received an Emmy Award for his television documentary work.

*Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* is the definitive biography of Thurgood Marshall, great lawyer and Supreme Court justice. Williams deals readers with a thorough, straightforward life of 'the unlikely leading actor in creating social change in the United States in the twentieth century.' With over 150 interviews, including lengthy sessions with Marshall himself in 1989, William completed the work honestly. Marshall is portrayed as an outspoken critic of black militancy and nonviolent demonstrations. Williams mentions, but does not dwell on, Marshall's history of heavy drinking, womanizing and sexual harassment. Nevertheless, this work will stand as an accessible and fitting tribute to a champion of individual rights and 'the architect of American race relations.'

## Lindsey R Swindall:

Lindsey R Swindall joined the faculty in the College of Arts and Letters at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey in 2015 and is a visiting assistant professor of History. She has written several books including *The Politics of Paul Robeson's*

*Othello, Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art* and *The Path to the Greater, Freer, Truer World: Southern Civil Rights and Anti-colonialism, 1937-1955* (2014).

*Paul Robeson: A Life of Activism and Art* is a biography of Paul Robeson, African American icon, and a demonstration of historian Lindsey R. Swindall's detailed research and reflection. Paul Robeson, who was an actor, singer, football player, political activist and writer, was one of the most diversely talented members of the Harlem Renaissance. Many previous works on Robeson have focused primarily on his involvement with the US Communist Party, paying little attention to the broader African influences on his politics and art. This book gives us a fresh look at his story, and the ways in which the struggles, successes and studies of his formative years came to shape him as an artist, activist and man later on. Swindall neatly frameworks the events of the life of Robeson in a way that freshly presents him as a man whose work was influenced by more than just his circumstances, but by a spirit rooted in dedication to the African's place in American art and politics.

## David Birmingham:

David Birmingham lived in Switzerland from 1947 to 1954 as a child and returned there in the 1990s as a visiting historian. From 1980 to 2001 he held the chair of Modern History in the University of Kent at Canterbury in England. He is the author of many books, including *Empire in Africa: Angola and Its Neighbors* (The dark years of European fascism left their indelible mark on Africa), *Portugal and Africa* (this is a collection of uniquely accessible historical essays, surveys this colonial encounter from its earliest roots), *Switzerland: A Village History* (it is an account of an Alpine village that illuminates the broader history of Switzerland and its rural, local underpinnings), *The Decolonization of Africa* (This presents a readily accessible introduction to one of the major themes of twentieth-century world history) and *Kwame Nkrumah: The Father of African Nationalism.*

*Kwame Nkrumah: The Father of African Nationalism* is a biography of Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), first African statesman to achieve world recognition, who became president of the new Republic of Ghana in 1960. His greatest achievement was to win the right of Blacks in Africa to have a vote and to determine their own destiny. He turned a dream of liberation into a political reality.

## Statement of the Problem:

The Dalits and the African-Americans are still in the hope of being treated as equals by non-Dalits and the Whites in the world of upper caste Hindus and the Whites respectively.

## Review of Literature:

As per the researcher's cognition, many researchers across the world and India have studied the Dalit and Black Literatures. Here it is intended to review of relevant literature regarding the research topic: *Dalit and American Black Poetry A Comparative Study* by Vishwanath Dajeeba Chandanshive from Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded in 1998, *A Study of Selected Autobiographies in Dalit Literature* by Rani Somnath Sarode from Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune in 2015, *Writing the Self: A Thematic Study of Select Dalit Autobiographies* by Bolleddu Siva Nagaiah from Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur in 2015, *A comparative study of African American poets Langston Hughes and Le Roi Jones and Marathi Dalit poets Namdeo Dhasal and Daya Pawar* by Kolekar, T N from Shivaji University, Kolhapur in 2007, *The angst of African American and Dalit women a comparative study of the select works of Toni Morrison and Bama* by R, Dharani from Bharathiar University in 2009, *Dalit and African American Select Autobiographies Comparative Study* by Lavanya C. from University of Mysore, Karnataka in 2016 and a research article on Dalit and African American Autobiographies: A Comparative Study of *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life* and *Narrative of The Life of Fredrick Douglass* by S. Bharatiraja published in January, 2013. The above review shows research on Dalit and Black literature has been being done by number researchers across the world, but no one has even touched to biographies to study comparatively that make the topic uniquely identifiable.

## Aims and Objectives:

The proposed work "The Selected Dalit and African-American Biographies: A Study in Comparison" aims at studying selected biographies comparatively to focus upon similarities and dissimilarities, convergence and divergence, concord and discord etc. The objectives of this research have been:

To study and analyze select biographies as a generic study

To identify and understand the concepts of Dalit literature and Black literature with the theme search for space and self in select biographies

To study and analyze, comparatively, selected Dalit and African-American biographies with cultural, religious, economic, social and historical factors of different societies.

## Hypothesis:

The selected Dalit and African-American biographies contribute to promote the oppressed by trying to annihilate the untouchability and racial discrimination in India and USA respectively.

## Rationale behind the Study:

The issue of the day, the Dalits and the African-American are in the hope of being treated as equals by non-Dalits and the Whites respectively and the same hope continues till the achievement of equality, fraternity and identity in the world of upper caste Hindus and the Whites, leads the researcher to choose the proposed topic of comparison of selected biographies that may be a changing stone of the new emerging restructured society.

## Scope and Limitations of the Study:

The present research has a cosmic scope. The researcher will consider the select Dalit and Black or African American biographies. It is a simply comparative study of Dalit and African-American biographies to shade light on restructuring and reconstructing the socio-cultural factors and unfolding the experience of two different human communities. It may be useful to anthropologists, sociologists, linguists and whomsoever it may concern to disclose diverse truths about Dalit and African-American lives.

## Research Methodology:

The research methodology of this work will be analytical, interpretative, evaluative, comparative, and exploratory. The data will be analyzed from the standard criteria of comparative studies in order to find out the different factors of human relationship, slavery, untouchability and also similarities and dissimilarities in themes, myths, forms, artistic strategies, social and religious movements and trends.

## TENTATIVE CHAPTER SCHEME:

The tentative chapter scheme of the research work will be as follows:

**Chapter I**- Introduction

**Chapter II**- Theoretical Framework

**Chapter III**- The Selected Dalit Biographies

**Chapter IV**- The Selected African-American Biographies

**Chapter V**- Conclusion

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